PÁGINAS EN BLANCO:

TRANSMISSIONS OF TRAUMA IN JUNOT DÍAZ'S *THE BRIEF WONDROUS LIFE OF OSCAR WAO*

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ABSTRACT

CATALINA RIVERA: Páginas en blanco: Transmissions of Trauma in Junot Díaz's The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao
(Under the direction of María DeGuzmán)

While the titular character of Oscar appears to be unequivocal hero of Junot Díaz's novel The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao, the narrating figure of Yunior drives the text with his plural role as Watcher, teller, and participant in the drama of Oscar's tragedy. His footnotes, which often perplex readers by their very presence in a work of fiction, allow Yunior an intimate space in which he may bring language to the enigmatic truths of his trauma as a subject who subconsciously carries the burden of Dominican history; an impossible past wrought by Spanish conquest, the slave trade and the consequent economy of breeding people, the U.S. backed dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina in the Dominican Republic for most of the presumably enlightened twentieth century, and the alienation of Dominican diaspora seeking liberty and opportunity within the contemporary United States. This paper seeks to uncover Yunior's surfacing trauma, and explores the possibility of his bearing witness to the violence of his origins. Yunior names a story about an other in order to bring his experience to language before he has fully claimed it as his own. By playing with the medium and genre of his narrative, Yunior hails an unknown witness to hear his testimony. This interaction between narrator and reader potentially changes the tone of intercultural dialogue, where reader expectations are deliberately upset in order to defamiliarize difficult truths and for saying that which cannot be said without fear of antagonistic divisions.

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Nerd Fiction

Under the title, "Nerd Fiction," a three-sentence book review of Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* appeared in the September 2007 issue of *O, The Oprah Magazine*:

> Our hero: a fat, virginal, chronically lovelorn, science-fiction-obsessed Dominican American "ghetto nerd" addled by a family curse. Told in blindingly kinetic prose, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (Riverhead), Junot Díaz's dazzling debut novel, fulfills the promise of this writer's short story collection (Drown) [sic] and fully reveals a powerful presence in modern American fiction. Tip: Don't ignore the high-velocity snippets of Trujillo-era Dominican political history in the footnotes: They're the wheel on which this deeply personal story turns. (Medwick)

This short review, promoted by one of the most popular agents for contemporary readership in the United States is representative of the accolades proffered on Díaz's work in the wake of its publication in 2007. I begin with this appraisal, reprinted in its entirety, because it levels the sort of limiting summary of Díaz's project that exposes the difficulty that readers encounter in classifying and mastering the novel.

This paper proposes a less conventional reading of *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* that highlights the narrator's difficulty in expressing the traumatic Dominican history of conquest, slavery, dictatorship, and diaspora in the context of popular publication for U.S.ian audiences. [1] By cleverly manipulating generic reader expectations of Latino/a and Popular

[1] I borrow the term *U.S.ian (United Statesian)* from María DeGuzmán's essay on Achy Obejas's "Wrecks" (2007) in which she proposes it as a "more geo-politically precise term than 'American,'" which does not distinguish between individuals identifying as residents of the United States itself, or of the whole American continent and islands (274). In my own experience in Costa Rica, the Spanish the term, *Estadounidense*, denotes a non-derogatory appellation for U.S. citizens, which I also translate to U.S.ian. However clumsy the term may be, I use it to respectfully represent the general reader that Díaz's work first reached, the ethnic

Western fantasy, Diaz creates a new space for productive conversations regarding painful histories that are too often silenced by interpersonal defensiveness on all sides. Contrary to the suggestions of the *O, The Oprah Magazine* review, the hero in this new space is not simply Oscar, nor is his family curse story the unequivocal nucleus of the plot. I begin by contesting Medwick's approach to Díaz's novel because it is commonly reproduced in popular assessments of the novel's scope, [2] and overlooks the potential for witnessing traumatic experience and the polyphonous articulations that make testimony possible.

First, the review holds that the hero of the book is a fat, Dominican nerd dealing with the fantastic. The figure that is conspicuously absent from this review is the narrator, Yunior. Indeed, few reviewers mention Yunior, the self-proclaimed "Watcher," (a nod to Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* comics and the race of aliens responsible for chronicling the history of the known universe). Yet, it is Yunior who is responsible for setting the titular character, Oscar de León, as the misleading "hero," and who, I would argue, inhabits the tension of being the central protagonist, the primary character of the novel.[3]

While Yunior dedicates his first chapter to describing Oscar's early life and development into the lovelorn hero, the majority of the novel represents the reconstruction of Oscar's relatives' stories through Yunior's eyes. Yunior even goes as far as to appropriate the first-person voice of Oscar's sister, Lola. It is not until the midpoint of the long novel that Yunior relates his own experiences, in his own voice to treat Oscar as the narrative object for a story about himself. By the novel's conclusion, only 89 of the total 335 pages

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United States subject who is immersed in contemporary popular culture in the United States, regardless of race or additional national and cultural identifications.

[2] See Ch'ien, Danticat, Judge, Lewis, Medwick, Moreno, Okie, Scott, Zuarino

[3] Contrary to the *O, The Oprah Magazine* review

cover Oscar as the primary character. Yunior's interventions suggest that his narrative allows him to act out resistances of his own past by reimagining others with whom he shares haunting cultural and psychological affinities.[4]

Yunior begins by naming the story that he must get off of his chest, a so-called *fukú* curse story, which turns out to be the story of Oscar de León, an obese, fan-boy who lacks social credibility because his obsessive interest in speculative fan fictions and his unattractive appearance render him asexual in his home of the Patterson, New Jersey "ghetto." Oscar's condition is familiar in mainstream adolescent power hierarchies in the United States, but his position as an emasculated New Jersey-born Afro-Dominican amplifies his geek status from social misfit to ethnic mutant. When describing Oscar's condition as an obese, nerd-genre obsessed fan-boy, Yunior puts the familiar social disempowerment associated with adolescent readers of superhero comics, sci-fi, and fantasy genres in perspective: "You want to know what being an X-man feels like? Just be a smart bookish boy of color in a contemporary U.S. ghetto. Mamma mia! Like having bat wings or a pair of tentacles growing out of your chest" (Diaz 22). While Yunior paints Oscar as helplessly effeminate by both Dominican and U.S.ian standards, he takes care to describe himself as precisely that ideal of Dominican masculinity that we are told Oscar can never embody.

The more that Yunior embellishes on Oscar's pathetic inability to shed his embarrassing baggage, however, the more the narrator seems to exhibit the same stigmatized interests. This narrator knows an awful lot about Stan Lee and Jack Kirby characters, to whom he continually refers when describing Oscar's nerdiness. He can allude to J.R.R.

[4] Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis developed in the context of clinical treatment that encouraged the patient to recognize unconscious memories or thoughts that had been repressed from consciousness to protect the ego. Freud observed patient resistance to facing these repressed thoughts in the clinical setting, and interpretation to help the patient work through his or her resistances became the object of the analyst.

Tolkien villains and fantasy role-playing games with uncanny ease.[5] By the midpoint of the novel, when Yunior regains his prominent first-person narration and tells of his own experience living with Oscar as a college roommate, it becomes clear that Yunior's fascination with Oscar reflects more about his uneasy identification with him and all the masculine ambiguities that this relation entails than Yunior's professed intent to eulogize his subject as the proper hero.

The narration that describes this oppressive environment does not progress in such a linear fashion, however. Yunior tells us about Oscar's many failed attempts at love: a repetitive pattern of getting close to a woman but never being perceived as a sexual entity, only to have his desires rejected and initiate self-destructive behaviors. Mixed in between the particular women that captivate Oscar, Yunior also offers chapters told from the point of view of Oscar's sister Lola, with whom Yunior had shared a complicated romantic history. While Lola narrates in her own first-person point of view, it is unclear whether she represents a new voice, or whether Yunior imagines her narrative for himself.[6] What matters in these interruptions of Oscar's timeline according to Yunior, is that Lola, the unifying factor in Yunior and Oscar's relationship, is the only member of the de León family who seems to transcend the curse—the seemingly fated self-destructive behaviors that afflict her family in spite of their efforts to exist.

[5] In accordance with Sigmund Freud's essay, "The 'Uncanny'" (1919), I use the term "uncanny" throughout this paper to signify the "un-homely" or frightening, disquieting effect of familiarity that is concurrently rejected or cannot be assimilated. Yunior's identification with Oscar reflects this uneasy familiarity. Yunior protests that, unlike himself, Oscar could not live up to masculine ideals, but the repetitions of this sentiment coupled with the contrary observable similarities between them reveal that Yunior is haunted by his attempt to repress his own estranged reflection in Oscar.

[6] While this paper's scope focuses on Yunior's trauma, another study on the novel's deplorable treatment of women as scapegoats, which Yunior's appropriation of Lola's voice intimates, might examine the ways in which Yunior elides women in his testimony.

Yunior brings these tragedies to life when he offers the additional narratives of Oscar's grandfather, Abelard, a wealthy doctor whose fall from Trujillo's favor destroys his home and family, and Abelard's only surviving daughter, Oscar's mother, Beli. After a youth marred by physical abuse and forced labor, Beli is rescued by a generous relative who raises her with renewed love and opportunity for success. Inevitably, the fukú curse strikes again, and Beli's transgressive sexuality in Trujillo's dictatorship dooms her to a most alien fall into U.S.ian diaspora. Yunior remits this history of the de León family's inexplicable doom before he divulges his relation to the family as Lola's former lover and Oscar's closest friend. In the final chapters of the novel the pieces of Yunior's narrative begin to come together and we see that in spite of his peripheral relation to the de León family, he has incorporated all of the stories as his own. In tracing Oscar's doomed powerlessness in love through the generations that preceded him, Yunior finds a medium for expressing a cultural history that he shares as a Dominican American living in the contemporary United States.

This metamorphosis of Yunior's narrative from Oscar's story to his own matters because it suggests that Yunior tells this story in order to confront a personal and cultural trauma that has eluded him. He must defer his unassimilated experience until Oscar's story presents itself to him as a vehicle for putting the conditions for his existence into language. The act of narrating allows him to process cognitive closure for an incomprehensible story of his own traumatic origins. I use the lens of literary trauma theory and a psychoanalytic understanding of the subject's unconscious to propose that Yunior's act of narration blossoms into a testimony in the process of negotiating a yet-to-be confronted subjective experience. This paper will engage with these literary and psychoanalytic formulations of

trauma and trauma's communicability in order to highlight the deeper purpose of Yunior's narrative, which a notion of Oscar as the hero would obviate.

Before delving into the conditions for Yunior's particular traumas and the possibility of his writing Oscar's story as a way to confront these in testimony for a hailed witness, I find it useful to recall the conclusion of the *O, The Oprah Magazine* review, which implies that readers might be confused by the footnotes in the novel. Indeed, footnotes, which tend to offer clarifying authority in works of non-fiction would seem out of place in fiction. That the last of these observations is shared as a "tip" is noteworthy because it demonstrates that many readers do not know what to make of the footnotes, at worst ignoring them altogether. Yunior's footnotes, however, also implicate his narrative as a testimony of trauma because their authority is professedly unstable and seems to add to the truth of the trauma that Yunior endeavors to represent, rather than to a truth of the documented historical events to which he alludes.[7] As another safe space for divulging intimacies that even Yunior may not know how to encounter, the footnotes call the reader to witness the traumatic burden of Dominican history that he carries within the environs of the United States. [8]

[7] Kelly Oliver refers to the distinction between documented historical truth and empirically divergent psychic truth in her assessment of Dr. Dori Laub's analysis of a Holocaust survivor's testimony, during which historians challenged the veracity of her memory. Oliver concludes, "While the historians were listening to hear confirmation of what they already knew, the psychoanalysts were listening to hear something new, something beyond comprehension" (1).

[8] In interviews, Junot Díaz has referenced *Texaco: A Novel*, by Patrick Chamoiseau as the inspiration for his intimate footnotes. Readers of Manuel Puig's *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (first published in Argentina in 1976) will also recognize the utilization of footnotes in a parallel endeavor to express the trauma of a story that resists traditional narrative forms. Puig's footnotes detail psychoanalytic publications engaged with assessing homosexuality, beside a text of ambiguous speakers and dialogue that expresses the trauma of politics and individual subjectivity in 20th century Argentina, which, Díaz's Yunior reminds us, represents the location of another pernicious U.S. back dictatorship we'd like to forget. The Latin American and Caribbean turn to footnotes to express a history of un-*tellable* stories could be a larger study in itself on the impossibility of making sense of an outrageous history of conquest and slavery in the Americas that continues to this day. An additional question of why psychoanalysis and formulations of a split subject tend to populate Latin American ideas of consciousness remains, particularly in countries afflicted by despotic rule.

The footnotes that *O, The Oprah Magazine* shares as a "tip" represent the central tension of the novel in which Yunior's particular trauma finds new expression in words. The assertion that the footnotes drive the story is a key to making sense of the multivalent representations of trauma that Díaz employs in his reconstruction of a Dominican history that has not yet been confronted. To ignore the footnotes is to miss the much larger scope of Yunior's narrative: in telling Oscar's story about the fukú inherited from conquest, slavery, dictatorship and diaspora, and particularly by employing footnotes as gossip—a safe framework for intimate secrets and an unstable authority in a work of fiction, Yunior is actually bringing his own history of personal and cultural trauma to language, testifying to his incomprehensible past, and begging witness of his contemporary audience in the United States.

Yunior, the unlikely protagonist

My reading of Yunior as the protagonist would seem misguided at first glance. Yunior's introduction of Oscar would have us believe that the latter is indeed the hero of the novel. According to Yunior, "our hero was not one of those Dominican cats everybody's always going on about—he wasn't no home-run hitter or a fly bachatero, not a playboy with a million hots on his jock. And except for one period early in his life, dude never had much luck with the females (how *very* un-Dominican of him)" (Diaz 2007 11). Besides relating what Yunior understands as proper types of Dominican masculinity, an ideal that he would declare to embody himself, this opening asserts that "our hero," Oscar is un-Dominican to the point of mutant status.

It becomes evident that Oscar is monstrous (in Yunior's view) because he is incapable of transcending his geeky awkwardness and monstrous obesity when his most fervent desire is to be loved by a woman; he is powerless to be a man. Yunior describes Oscar as weak and insufferably

domestic (in other words, feminine) in his obsessive devotion to speculative fan fictions: superhero comics, science fiction, and fantasy. This portrait of Oscar suggests a conflated emasculation in both the Dominican and the U.S.ian imaginaries because of his interest in "nerdery" and failure to dominate women. The more that Yunior describes Oscar in supposed contrast to his own success in attracting women, however, the more we see that, whether he knows it or not, Yunior is trying to negotiate his own masculinity in opposition to the normative pressures of North American and Dominican ideals.

As Yunior narrates himself from third-person "Watcher" of Oscar and his relatives' reconstructed story, to first-person participant in Oscar's story, uncanny similarities between Oscar and Yunior as male reflections, or negatives, of each other in their cultures emerge. Both Oscar and Yunior enjoy reading, in fact, they both aspire to be writers. While Oscar's intellectual production is mocked as second-rate genre literature, however, Yunior appears to reach a level of conventional success as he writes the "realist" novel that we are reading and teaches writing at a community college. Yunior describes Oscar's prolific writing, but we never actually read his prose, thus his intellectual authority is left to Yunior's conjecture. As readers, Oscar and Yunior devalue the Dominican assumptions of masculine action that Yunior conflates with Oscar's weakness when he describes Oscar's youth writing, "Victimized by other boys—punches and pushes and wedgies and broken glasses and brand-new books from Scholastic, at a cost of fifty cents each, torn in half before his very eyes. You like books? Now you got two! Har-har!… Even his own mother found his occupations nutty. Go outside and play! she commanded at least once a day. Pórtate como un muchacho normal" (Diaz 22).[9] Similarities between Yunior and Oscar's intellectual interests and the gendering that these project on them are amplified when we explore how these successes and failures affect each of their experiences in relation to women.

In her literary analysis of the short story "The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao" (2000) that preceded the novel of the same name, Lyn Di Iorio Sandin argues that Yunior, the narrator is

[9] *Behave yourself like a normal young man.*

"Oscar's friend, model, and double" (26). She comments on Oscar's failure with women as an external deformity, while Yunior's inability to remain faithful with any of the various women he chases stands as an internal deformity. Both men fail with women. That Yunior sees himself reflected in Oscar surfaces in the narrative as Yunior tells us that he is also unable to love honestly in the matrix of cultural expectations for masculinity. He possesses masculine power within the Dominican context because he has physical (sexual) prowess with multiple women and he seems incapable of avoiding infidelity (a virtue of sexual vigor in the context of Latin American machismo culture). Yunior's relationship with Oscar's sister, Lola, challenges his "proper masculinity," however, as he finds himself torn between love for her and his inability to remain faithful. Yunior characterizes Oscar's doom as disappointment in attracting women while he exposes his own discomfort with being able to mask his failures with women and pass for properly masculine as a player.

Yunior's unstable definition of Dominican masculinity might be traced back farther than the novel itself. Readers who are familiar with Junot Díaz's first publication, the short story collection, *Drown* (1996), would recognize Yunior as the young boy trying to make sense of his parents' relationship in the short stories "Fiesta, 1980" and "Aguantando." The young Yunior is bookish and observant. His stories relate his introspective reflection on the adults' gendered, asymmetrical power, which is so unsettling that it makes him physically ill. In "Fiesta, 1980" Yunior develops a pattern of car-sickness in his father's new van, which he describes in tandem with meeting his father's not-so-secret mistress saying, "I met the Puerto Rican woman right after Papi had gotten the van. He was taking me on short trips, trying to cure me of my vomiting. It wasn't really working but I looked forward to our trips, even though at the end of each one I'd be sick. These were the only times me and Papi did anything together. When were alone he treated me much better, like maybe I was his son or something" (Diaz 35). The van that makes Yunior sick enables his father's infidelity. His mother comforts Yunior's repeated nausea, but his father remains the perpetrator who prohibits his son from eating before car trips to avoid the mess. If we appreciate that this young Yunior matures

and goes on to narrate in the novel about Oscar, we see that the problems of male mobility and betrayal, compounded with his feelings of alienation from his father, have prescribed his masculinity (and his resulting repression of these fissures in his subjectivity) since his youth.

Yunior begins to negotiate these complicated ideals of masculinity, which seem to engender his neurosis through his description of Oscar's troubled experience. He narrates that even when expanding his horizons from the condemning environment of the Patterson, New Jersey "ghetto" to the liberating promise of college diversity, Oscar is again taunted by accusations that he is not black enough, not Dominican enough, not man enough. Yunior is even complicit in this mockery when the jeering nickname "Oscar Wao" is leveled at Oscar after Yunior tells us

> Halloween he made the mistake of dressing up as Doctor Who, was real proud of his outfit too…. I couldn't believe how much he looked like that fat homo Oscar Wilde, and I told him so. You look just like him, which was bad news for Oscar, because Melvin said, Oscar Wao, quién es Oscar Wao, and that was it, all of us started calling him that: Hey, Wao, what you doing? Wao, you want to get your feet off my chair?
>
> And the tragedy? After a couple of weeks dude started *answering* to it. (Diaz 180)

Just as he views this "tragedy" of Oscar answering to the perjorative "Wao," and the queer masculinity and ethnicity that the nickname implies, Yunior realizes his need to negotiate his own queer gender among the prescriptive norms that Dominican and U.S.ian societies recognize for him.[10] It is almost as though Yunior needs the extreme emasculate characterization of Oscar in order to disidentify with the masculine ideals that are projected upon him in disparate ways by the cultures

[10] Antonio Viego remarks on the affinities between identifications of queer sexuality and gender and the broad ethnic designation of Latino writing, "Just as *queer* attempts to disturb binary categories like homosexuality/heterosexuality, female/male, masculinity/femininity, *Latino* similarly, due to its general inconclusivity with respect to remarking on categories of race and ethnicity; disturbs the logic by which ethnicity/race can be posed as a binary pair. In short, *Latino* queers ethnicity and race" (21). This expands Yunior's challenge to prescriptive social identities to his ethnic categorization as well as to his negotiation of masculinity.

with which he identifies himself.[11] By disidentifying with Oscar, Yunior may challenge the cultural expectations that bind him while protecting himself behind his mask of proper masculinity as the third-party narrator.

Yunior's conversational narrative style seduces the reader into believing that Oscar is "our hero," in spite of his deformity. He progresses through the story of Oscar's deficient masculinity and how it precludes his only desire of being loved by a woman. Uncanny similarities between the Oscar that Yunior describes disparagingly and the Yunior that exposes himself in the narration, however, suggest that the fukú curse of failed masculinity is part of Yunior's own inexpressible trauma. In this sense, it appears that Yunior's use of Oscar as the subject for his narrative may be a work of disidentifying with the failed masculinity that Oscar embodies. By talking about Oscar, Yunior deflects the introspective reflection that his own working through might appear to be. It becomes evident that Oscar, and his inevitable failed quest for love, is not the focus of the narrative. Instead, the project of narrating Oscar's doom provides Yunior with a necessary vehicle for confronting his own repressed anxieties about his failed normative masculinities between Dominican and North American ideals. Yunior becomes the unlikely protagonist that sneaks up on readers over the course of the novel.

Trauma in literary narrative

The literary trauma theory that I view resonating within Díaz's work is primarily indebted to the psychoanalytic methods developed by Sigmund Freud, and later Jacques Lacan. Contemporary literary trauma scholars like Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth turn to Freud's work to suggest that trauma disrupts consciousness because it is not fully assimilated as it occurs, and therefore is only

[11] Performance Studies scholar, José Esteban Muñoz offers the term *disidentification* for queer artists of color who draw attention to conventions of mainstream culture in order to challenge them. I ascribe Yunior's disidentification to his performance of masculinity through describing Oscar in opposition to himself.

experienced belatedly.[12] Caruth writes, "The traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history that they cannot entirely possess" (Caruth 1995, 5). This trauma may affect individuals or entire cultures, because it results from incomprehensible survival.[13]

Freud proposed the therapeutic import of language as early as *Studies on Hysteria*, which he published with Josef Breuer during the Cathartic period of early psychoanalysis, when he wrote, "The injured person's reaction to the trauma only exercises a completely 'cathartic' effect if it is an *adequate* reaction—as, for instance, revenge. But language serves as a substitute for action; by its help, an affect can be 'abreacted' almost as effectively" (Breuer and Freud 1893, 8). While Freud later abandoned much of the theory developed in relation to hysteric abreaction, he continued to publish on traumatic experience until the end of his life.

Likewise, Lacan expands the inaccessibility of trauma by figuring it as a remainder of the real, or as "that which has not yet been symbolized," that "implies fixation or blockage" and takes Freud's early talking cure as way for a sufferer to assimilate the experience by putting it into language (Fink, 24-26). For Lacan, trauma emerges in encounters with the

[12] "The historical power of the trauma is not just that the experience is repeated after its forgetting, but that it is only in and through its inherent forgetting that it is first experienced at all. And it is this inherent latency of the event that paradoxically explains the peculiar, temporal structure, the belatedness, of historical experience: since the traumatic event is not experienced as it occurs, it is fully evident only in connection with another place, and in another time. If repression, in trauma, is replaced by latency, this is significant in so far as its blankness—the space of unconsciousness—is paradoxically what precisely preserves the event in its literality. For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence" (Caruth 1995, 7-8).

[13] "External violence is felt most, not in its direct experience, but in the missing of this experience; that trauma is constituted not only by the destructive force of a violent event but by the very act of its survival. If we are to register the impact of violence we cannot, therefore, locate it only in the destructive moment of the past, but in an ongoing survival that belongs to the future. It is because violence inhabits, incomprehensibly, the very survival of those who have lived beyond it that it may be witnessed best in the future generations to whom this survival is passed on" (Caruth 1993, 25).

Other's desire, and part of the subject's development includes trauma as a defensive mechanism (Fink 65-3).

Moving beyond Freud's initial characterization of trauma as a shocking event, Lacan suggests the trauma can afflict everyone differently depending on an individual's reality, or "that which is named by language and can thus be thought and talked about" (Fink 25). Trauma may effectively develop in any individual who suffers fixation from an inability to assimilate an experience, since "every person's reality differs by the mere fact that every cultural and religious group, subculture, family, and set of friends develops its own words, expressions and idiosyncratic meanings" (Fink, 25). Similarly, Kalí Tal employs this "talking cure" when trauma demands a witness for assimilation in shared history asserting, "Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it "real" both to the victim and to the community. Such writing serves both as validation and cathartic vehicle for the traumatized author" (Tal 1996, 21). Yunior's act of narration touches on all of these notions of trauma, as he utilizes Oscar's story to bring his own experience into language. By reconstructing a narrative he brings cognitive closure to the silences of his past for his intended reader, his own testimony.

Modern literary trauma theory has engaged with the necessity of rendering traumatic experience in language with theories of bearing witness to traumatic testimony.[14] Caruth, Deborah Horvitz, and Victoria Burrows suggest that literature provides mass potential for communicating traumatic testimony in its use of figurative language like metaphor to express events that resist language indirectly. Horvitz's observation of the complementarity of

[14] Judith Herman writes, "To study psychological trauma means bearing witness to horrible events. When the events are natural disasters or 'acts of God,' those who bear witness sympathize readily with the victim. But when the traumatic events are of human design, those who bear witness are caught in the conflict between victim and perpetrator" (Herman, 7).

literature and psychoanalysis as hermeneutic projects leads her to note that, "Fictional characters experience trauma and, subsequently, as a self-protective response, repress its memories.[15] And, it is within the discourse of healing that the operative dynamics among memory, remembering, and narrative converge. Then they may find both the capacity to remember and 'the words to say it,' making healing possible" (Horvitz, 10).[16] Díaz's text, Yunior's trauma is slightly different in nature in that so much of this reconstruction of the de León family story must be imagined, we have no way of knowing how many of the details he really knew. The footnotes also consistently undercut the truth of the body text, drawing attention to their literary qualities when Yunior admits that he takes liberties with the "facts" of the story for the sake of a poetic representation. All this play between the truth and the literary mystifies the footnotes, and yet the repetitive nature of his dreams and acting-outs suggest that they help Yunior work out tensions, as he too is fixed in resistances of the past. Yunior's personal trauma involves his negotiation of a queer masculinity and his Dominican American ethnicity in the matrix of disparate social pressures.

In his narrative of Oscar's tragedy, Yunior bears witness to the workings of the de León family's various personal and collective traumas; which effectively provides him with the language to express his own personal trauma for the witness of his summoned reading

[15] Horvitz's statement appears to suppose that fictional characters may experience trauma, which may seem paradoxical. In my view, the fact that a Yunior in the flesh has never existed does not obviate the possibility of his invention to express the traumatic truths of the writer's experience, whether this expression is done consciously or not.

[16] The desire to "heal" psychic distress may reflect more of the U.S.ian adaptation of ego-psychology that evolved from Anna Freud's analysis after the death of her father. In his later publications, Sigmund Freud's theory of psychoanalysis seems to diverge from a possibility of healing, culminating in his bleak considerations that repression can never be expelled altogether in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930). Antonio Viego discredits ego-psychology and its dysfunctional premise of the potential for psychical wholeness, which Jacques Lacan's branch of psychoanalysis condemned. Viego posits that while healing is untenable, analytical treatment can teach patients to cope, or just be with their neurosis, because they recognize that language cuts everyone indiscriminately and this offers a binding social condition (Viego 236).

audience.[17] He begins his narrative in the arresting preface, which addresses a witness-listener (like the one theorized by scholars Felman, Laub, Caruth, and Tal) from the beginning in its literary tempo and aural qualities, the first footnotes that actually hail a presumed other in the audience, and his grasp of a traumatic imperative to tell the story that follows.

Yunior's Expression of Trauma

The novel opens before Yunior has introduced himself as the narrator persona, in fact it is unclear whether he is an operative figure in the text or a third-person omniscient narrator until page five, and he emerges as an active hero much later in chapter four. On the first page, however, the text plays on aural sensibilities in its rhythmic punctuated tempo and allusions to sound; the basis of the story is introduced like the beating of a drum that must be actively heard:

> They say it came first from Africa, carried in the screams of the enslaved; that it was the death bane of the Tainos, uttered just as one world perished and another began; that it was a demon drawn into Creation through the nightmare door that was cracked open in the Antilles. *Fukú americanus*, or more colloquially, fukú—generally a curse or a doom of some kind; specifically the Curse and Doom of the New World. Also called the fukú of the Admiral because the Admiral was both its midwife and one of its greatest European victims; despite "discovering" the New World the Admiral died

[17] "While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma—as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock—has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to—and heard—is, therefore, the process and the place where cognizance, the 'knowing' of the event is given birth to…. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time" (Laub, 57).

> miserable and syphilitic, hearing (dique) divine voices. In Santo Domingo, the Land He Loved Best (what Oscar, at the end, would call the Ground Zero of the New World), the Admiral's very name has become synonymous with both kinds of fukú, little and large; to say his name aloud or even to hear it is to invite calamity on the heads of you and yours. (Díaz, 1)

The rhythmic punctuation of the beginning draws the text further into spoken speech with the inflections of informal, colloquial, dialectic, even profane language.[18] This opening demands an active listener, in the physical sense of the word before the particulars of the story are revealed. As the text progresses, however, the suggestion of a testimony of trauma emerges in the lines that follow.

After going as far back as the event of conquest to relay the origins of his story, the unnamed narrator infuses the text with traumatic histories and the power of words when he states, "no matter what its name or provenance, it is believed that the arrival or Europeans on Hispaniola unleashed the fukú on the world, and we've all been in the shit ever since" (Díaz, 1). This figurative "shit" is the place from which the narrator will testify. Yunior can give language to his trauma, or to the trauma of the contemporary Dominican Republic irrelevant of place, in the discussion of *fukú.* Here, fukú becomes the word for what he has not yet known how to talk about until he is compelled to talk about Oscar.

The succeeding history of fukú is elucidated by the introduction of footnotes that immediately place the curse in the twentieth century and the period of the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo Molina in the Dominican Republic. The audience that has been called to the text is now addressed directly, and particularly, when a first world reader is

[18] *Dique* is a colloquial contraction of the Spanish "dicen que," *they say* or *so-called*, but it remains undefined in the text.

actively welcomed by the footnotes with interpolations like “For those of you who missed your mandatory two seconds of Dominican history” and “Here’s one for you conspiracy-minded fools” (Díaz, 2 and 4, respectively). These initial addresses request an audience early on, but the impact of the footnotes in expressing Yunior’s trauma demands a witness to his testimony as the story progresses.

The preface concludes after the narrator gives voice to the unnamed Yunior’s trauma as though to an expected witness when he shares that the story to follow is unremarkable, but it is his own, saying,

> There are zillions of these fukú stories. Even my mother, who almost never talks about Santo Domingo, has started sharing hers with me.
>
> As I’m sure you’ve guessed by now, I have fukú story too. I wish I could say it was the best of the lot—fukú number one—but I can’t. Mine ain’t the scariest, the clearest, the most painful, or the most beautiful.
>
> It just happens to be the one that’s got its fingers around my throat. (Díaz, 6)

The image of fukú grabbing hold of the speaker’s throat resonates powerfully with theorizations of psychic trauma that suggest the fixed inability to assimilate experience into personal history represented by traumatic silence.

Yunior is not alone in his negotiation of personal trauma in the text. The story he feels compelled to impart about the intergenerational figures in the de León family begins with the character of Oscar, who is represented as a Dominican American anomaly who must constantly defend his Dominican-ness from social attacks on his masculinity. This is not so much Oscar’s story as it is Yunior’s story of bearing witness to Oscar’s story. That collective trauma rests at the center of the story is made apparent by many characters, from

their multigenerational experience of the "curse," to the efforts that Yunior makes in narrating various perspectives from the vantage point of his peripheral relationship to the family.

Yunior remits the tale of the demise of Oscar beginning with his incompetence in love, and tracing it back to his ancestors' fated inability to make self-preserving decisions when facing impending danger. Oscar's social deviance is prolifically ascribed to his interest in marginalized fan fictions and effeminate habits of reading, role-playing, and asexuality due to his physical appearance and tendency to fall for inaccessible women. While he can never seem to help himself in regards to his aberrant fascinations, as Daniel Bautista demonstrates,[19] it is Oscar's predilection for speculative fiction that ultimately makes him amenable to the possibility of his family curse, fukú.

In retelling Oscar's fukú, Yunior imagines the personal traumas that Oscar's mother, grandmother-figure, and grandfather contended with in the violent context of twentieth century Dominican Republic. Yunior's narrative continually dwells upon the "páginas en blanco" that elude a factual recounting of the family histories, which remain unknowable.[20] While Yunior's narrative adds literary weight to the descriptions of abuses to human life, dignity, and freedoms rampant throughout the de León's lives, his narrative voice shifts significantly when he tells about Oscar's sister, Lola, in her first-person voice.

Lola, raped as a child, a victim of individual trauma in the mainstream North American sense, stands out as the only figure to speak in her own first person voice, though presumably still in a first-person voice as imagined by Yunior. This is apparent when Yunior

[19] Bautista, 48.

[20] "Páginas en blanco" referenced in Díaz pp. 90, 119, 325; also in Oscar's lost manuscript and Abelard's destroyed book.

repeats the artificial rendering of "Happy!" individuals in Lola's voice, and later in his own to describe himself and her daughter, Isis, in the last pages of the book. Lola's trauma is made more conspicuous because she is the only survivor to expand the de León family, and her particular trauma of sexual abuse is recalled briefly by Yunior and Oscar in moments of confidence, though never exhaustively in her own voice. Finally, the paradox of Lola's experience transmitted imaginatively by Yunior highlights his place in the drama of the family as her failed lover.

While Yunior demonstrates his significant attachment to Lola increasingly throughout the novel, his own hyper-masculine insecurities fate him to betray their relationship and pre-determine his inability to love honestly.[21] In this way, Oscar's titular trauma may be said to parallel that of Yunior, in that he carries the weight of Dominican history with the additional, intolerable fact of being fatally unlucky in love. Yunior's incapacitating trauma is essentially his identification with Oscar and his need to refute it (made excessively apparent in his equal knowledge of marginal fan fictions, paired with his great efforts to conceal his nerdiness physically). Yunior stands apart in that his trauma is less recognizable by hegemonic discourses, but reveals itself over the course of the novel as we understand that this telling the story of Oscar is really an indirect expression of his own incomprehensible history as a Dominican American.[22] When he realizes that he could have saved the relationship and himself by saying those three words, he cannot even spell them, but makes them clear in dashes, "Before all hope died I used to have this stupid dream that shit could be saved, that

[21] Díaz's Yunior was first introduced in his short story, "Fiesta, 1980" in the collection, *Drown*, as a young boy surrounded by problematic relations between men and women in the Dominican-North American family. The character has been suggested to be an "alter-ego" for Díaz himself, as he transcribes the complexities of the cultural ideals of masculinity in his fiction.

[22] On Yunior identifying with Oscar: "We perceive that the self-reproaches are reproaches against a loved object which have been shifted away from the patient's own ego" (Freud-M&M 1917, 586).

we would be in bed together like the old times, with the fan on, the smoke from our weed drifting above us, and I'd finally try to say the words that could have saved us. ____ ____ ____. But before I can shape the vowels I wake up" (Díaz, 327). This dream, suggestively recurrent, exposes Yunior's failure of language, and what drives him to construct a narrative in order to reconcile his past through the dissociative act of telling a story.

Díaz confirms the trauma in the fukú that drive Yunior's telling in an interview conducted by Edwidge Danticat, responding to her question of what type of curse fukú is:

> The fukú was different in that it was the one curse that explicitly implicated the historical trauma of our creation, as an area, a people. I mean, how crazy is that? A Dominican curse that seems to have its origins in the arrival of the European? In Columbus? Say his name aloud and bad shit will happen to you? For a writer like me- the fukú was a narrative dream come true.… For me, though, the real issue in the book is not whether or not one can vanquish the fukú- but whether or not one can even see it. Acknowledge its existence at a collective level. To be a true witness to who we are as a people and to what has happened to us. That is the essential challenge for the Caribbean nations- who, as you pointed out, have been annihilated by history and yet who've managed to put themselves together in an amazing way. That's why I thought the book was somewhat hopeful at the end. The family still won't openly admit that there's a fukú, but they're protecting the final daughter, Isis, from it collectively, and that's close, very close to my dream of us bearing witness to (in Glissant's words) "the past, to which we were subjected, which has not yet emerged as history for us (but that) is however, obsessively present." (Danticat, 90)

The desire to inscribe a Dominican history reverberates throughout the text in the image of blank pages that elude knowability, the *páginas en blanco*. The blank pages that proliferate Dominican history emerge first in Yunior's footnote introducing the incomplete memoirs of " the Demon Balaguer" (Díaz 90). While Yunior imagines Oscar's grandfather, Abelard, summoning the fukú that would afflict the family by daring to write a book about Trujillo's supernatural power over the people that no one will read, Oscar later attempts to *zafa*, or overcome the fukú by writing his own book about the curse. That Yunior relates experiencing Oscar's blank book in recurring dreams, makes him repeatedly refer to the blank pages of history. Like the Glissant quote that Díaz recalls in his endeavor to write into the silences of Dominican history, the supernatural power of Trujillo, or fukú is the most comprehensible description of trauma available to the innumerable *páginas en blanco*. Dr. Laub writes that "the speakers about trauma prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to—and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage" (Laub, 58). By deferring his silence through Oscar's story, Yunior maintains this sanctuary for himself.

This invocation of traumatic silence as both safe and binding resounds with the commentary that author Junot Díaz shared when asked about the theme of *páginas en blanco* saying, "All societies are organized by the silences that they need to maintain. I think the role of the arts is to try to delineate, break, and introduce language into some of these silences…. So this book was more of an arrow to what's missing. And the 'página en blanco' is just a metaphor for that" (Moreno, 539). More than something that people refuse to talk about, Díaz characterizes the silences as trauma adding,"they cannot even talk about it. There is not even language" (Moreno, 539). While for Yunior, fukú represents the

collective curse of the new world, in this rendering, it also gives name to the incomprehensible history of human experience in the Dominican Republic.

The particular force of the footnotes in conveying Yunior's trauma need not be read as an intimacy that he recognizes divulging as his own trauma.[23] He uses the space of the footnotes to express peripherally related truths as intimate information. While the footnotes often share historical data that the presumed contemporary reader in the United States may not know due to historical amnesia or political suppression, the manner of their communication with suggested confidence, as though they were secrets, or even gossip, implies that there is safety in their inclusion outside of the body text and primary story. It is as though Yunior could not share the concealed details of the footnotes without the vehicle of Oscar's story to help him focus and articulate the anecdotes that stick with him.

The impossibility of creating an inclusive history even emerges when Yunior plays with the conventions of his narrative, as when he adds in a footnote elucidating on the setting of Beli's beach love affair,

> In my first draft, Samaná was actually Jarabacoa, but then my girl Leonie, resident expert in all things Domo, pointed out that there are no beaches in Jarabacoa. Beautiful rivers but no beaches. Leonie was also the one who informed me that the perrito (see first paragraphs of chapter one, 'Ghetto Nerd at the End of the World') wasn't popularized until the late eighties, early nineties, but that was one detail I couldn't change, just liked the image too much. Forgive me, historians of popular dance, forgive me! (Díaz, 132)

[23] "That a fictional character may remain unaware of her or his trauma does not impede a literary critic from recognizing such meaning…. The impact of major traumatic events is never identical on any two people, and…trauma manifests where political and psychological forces fuse" (Horvitz, 4).

That Yunior collapses the truth of his footnotes by drawing attention to the literary liberties he takes in telling the story of the de Leóns undoes any interpretations that a reader may have had of the footnotes relating mere fact. In effect, this poetic license actually strengthens the meaning that he hopes to transmit in describing pre-teen Oscar one way, and Beli's domestic fantasy another. This deception does more to suggest Yunior's attempt to narrate a perceived truth than to provide mere authoritative data on his story, all for the sake of transmitting *his* story.

Another example of a footnote that seems tangential from the plot of Oscar's story, but which reveals Yunior's challenges with the present Dominican Republic is transmitted when he tells us of the *criada* he knows back in Santo Domingo. He recalls, "I lived in Santo Domingo only until I was nine, and even I knew criadas" (Díaz, 253). Rather than explicitly define what a *criada* is, Yunior describes the girls he knew with the expectation of shock with which his first world audience would respond, to the reality that he's expressing: modern-day slavery at the United States' doorstep. He continues,

> Every year I came home from the States, it was the same thing; quiet hardworking Sobeida would stop in for a second to say a word to my abuelo and my mother (and also to watch a couple of minutes of a novela) before running off to finish her next chore…. I tried to talk to her, of course—Mr. Community Activist—but she would skitter away from me and my stupid questions. What can you two talk about? my moms demanded. La pobrecita can't even write her own name. (Díaz, 253)

The footnote glosses a foreign concept that could stand for additional information from an authoritative source, like conventional footnotes do, but with the new information there is shame and resignation. The difficulty of this confidence is amplified when you pair Yunior's

feelings with the history of slavery that his homeland is familiar with, and possibly complicit in propagating.

Yunior's communication to a North American reader suggests that the footnotes say more about relations in the United States than they do about facts in the Dominican Republic. When describing Oscar as a social outcast, Yunior offers a footnote defining parigüayo: "The perjorative *parigüayo*, Watchers agree, is a corruption of the English neologism 'party watcher.' The word came into common usage during the First American Occupation of the DR, which ran from 1916 to 1924. (You didn't know we were occupied twice in the twentieth century? Don't worry, when you have kids they won't know the U.S. occupied Iraq either)" (Díaz, 19). The explicit expectation of a reader in the United States furthers the suggestion that if the modern homeland is complicit in the slavery that he bears witness to, then the reader that he demands as witness to his testimony is complicit in his trauma as well.[24]

Likewise, the character of Lola expresses frustrated complicity in her witness of Oscar's tragic death when Yunior tells us, "Lola swore she would never return to that terrible country. On one of our last nights as novios she said, Ten million Trujillos is all we are" (Díaz, 324). Lola's identification with Trujillo, the figure so evil that he is compared to Sauron and Darkseid, evokes the tension between bearing witness to trauma in solidarity with either the perpetrator or the victim, or both. The question of complicity in trauma has been discussed by theorists like Caruth, LaCapra, Laub and Herman, who draw attention to the paradox of the witness identifying with both the perpetrator and victim in listening to

[24] In *Spain's Long Shadow*, María DeGuzmán designates the hegemonic Anglo-American population targeted as this audience, which would be indoctrinated in the views of Spanish and Latin American abstraction as an *other* to American-ness. This is the *America* that represses knowledge of its own history, its "páginas en blanco" for the ethno-racialized subject to work out into language.

testimony.[25] As much as the footnotes reveal about Yunior's personal challenges to cope with the context surrounding Oscar's death, they effectively tell the same story about the United States and the reader that would recognize the historical intervention taking place in Yunior's narrative.

By the end of Yunior's narrative, after his description of Oscar's fated death, the footnotes are supplanted by straight vignettes of Yunior's experience that break temporal bounds of narration, but relate his trauma most clearly without pretensions. The final, third part of the novel is relatively very short, and brings the story back to Yunior and Lola together. Once again, Yunior demonstrates that he is incapable of staying true to Lola in spite of his attachment to her. Oscar demonstrates that he is incapable of staying away from the woman he loves at the risk of his own life.

Before he is killed, Oscar writes letters about the book that he is working on, but does not describe what it is about. Yunior never sees the pages, but in the years following Oscar's death he describes having recurring dreams. First, where they are back at Rutgers, and he remembers him as he was before the fatal return to the Dominican Republic. "He wants to talk to me, is anxious to jaw, but most of the time I can never say a word and neither can he. So we just sit there quietly" (Díaz, 325). Yunior recalls the time and space when he acted out against Oscar, possibly resenting him because he identified with him, and even in his dream he cannot face himself in language. The second dream also fails in language:

> About five years after he died I started having another kind of dream. About him or someone who looks like him. We're in some kind of ruined bailey that's filled to the rim with dusty old books. He's standing in one of the passages, all mysterious-like,

[25] Herman suggests, "It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing…. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering" (Herman, 7-8).

> wearing a wrathful mask that hides his face but behind the eyeholes I see a familiar pair of close-set eyes. Dude is holding up a book, waving for me to take a close look, and I recognize this scene from one of his crazy movies. I want to run from him, and for a long time that's what I do. It takes me a while before I notice that Oscar's hands are seamless and the book's pages are blank.
>
> And that behind his mask his eyes are smiling.
>
> *Zafa.*
>
> Sometimes, though, I look up at him and he has no face and I wake up screaming. (Díaz, 325)

The recurring dreams center on the failure of language that fixes Yunior's subconscious.[26] The striking image of Oscar's seamless hands holding up a book of blank pages resonate with Bruce Fink's explication of the Lacanian real that trauma represents. Fink writes,

> Lacan's real is without zones, subdivisions, localized highs and lows, or gaps and plenitudes…. It is a sort of smooth, seamless surface or space which applies as much to a child's body as to the whole universe. The division of the real into separate zones, distinct features, and contrasting structures is a result of the symbolic order, which, in a matter of speaking, cuts into the smooth façade of the real, creating divisions, gaps, and distinguishable entities and laying the real to rest, that is by drawing or sucking it into the symbols used to describe it, and thereby annihilating it. (Fink, 24)

[26] Freud's foundational *The Interpretation of Dreams*, would further suggest that Yunior's dreams represent an unconscious desire to confront his past, as represented by Oscar.

Only the *Zafa*, anti-curse dream presents Yunior with the real before loss. The version of the dream including the man without a face is the fukú that still haunts him. This description of the real beyond language and the ensuing gaps fixes Yunior's present experience of Oscar.

What Yunior cannot give words to, except through a narrative "about" Oscar, is not merely Oscar's story, but a confrontation with his own role in the trauma of Dominican history. From conquest, to slavery, to dictatorship, to diaspora, Yunior is finding the words for his origins, victimhood, and complicity in the incomprehensibility of the human events that gave way to his social reality by confronting his aversion to aspects of himself that he projected onto Oscar. Like Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," Yunior repeats his own anxiety by invoking the de Leóns. That Oscar's story is tied in with his failed love of Lola is significant because not only do the de Leóns represent what Yunior cannot abide in himself, his deficient masculinity, but they additionally hold his inaccessible desires.

In his narrative, Yunior involves the reader in a story about Oscar to resist the appropriation of the story as his own. By relegating the expression of his trauma to Oscar he is able to complete the work of his manuscript. Yunior's entire project of telling Oscar's story could be seen as a *working-through* in the Freudian sense,[27] by which he continues to bear the fukú's hold around his throat. The dreams presumably keep recurring. Even his melancholy at the end suggests that he has not claimed the story as his own, but instead preserves a room full of artifacts in his basement for the next generation, Lola's daughter, Isis, to come and attempt her own record for the *páginas en blanco.*

[27] Freud 1914, 155.

New Spaces for Testimony

Yunior's narrative seems to find peace in Lola's insistence that "ten million Trujillos is all we are." Her admission of complicity in Oscar's doom suggests that Yunior begs for both recognition of his humanity, and an admission of involvement from the U.S.ian reader he hails as witness. This might be an ambitious request, but the novel's resistance to easy classification is what brings its mediating potential to light. Rather than fall within one genre to placate reader expectations, Díaz effectively creates a new space for talking about an incomprehensible past without attending to individual biases. He used the defamiliarizing potential of various fantastic genres so that Yunior's narrative invites friendly engagement without putting readers on the defensive, as stories about complicity in trauma might otherwise do.

The novel invites unfamiliar readers with its façade of Magical Realism.[28] However, upon engaging with the text, the novel resists categorization of genre in its playful disavowal of the Magical Realism conventions that contemporary North American markets have come to expect of Latin American, and by extension, Latino/a writers of fiction within the confines of the United States. Díaz ornaments his narrative with a spectacle of allusions to the fantastic genres of superhero comics, science fiction, and quest fantasy that many U.S.ian readers already take for granted in mass markets. By beginning with a tongue-in-cheek rejection of "Macondo" and "McOndo," Diaz focalizes an ambivalence toward the pressures

[28] Because of my focus on reader expectations, I use the term "Magical Realism" as it is used by North American publishers to label surrealist works by Latin American authors of the late twentieth century. Wendy B. Faris's brief definition of the term applies to many of these mass produced texts: "magical realism combines realism and the fantastic so that the marvelous seems to grow organically within the ordinary, blurring the distinction between them. Furthermore, the combination of realistic and fantastical narrative, together with the inclusion of different cultural traditions, means that magical realism reflects, in both its narrative mode and its cultural environment, the hybrid nature of postcolonial society" (1). This definition, highlighting postcolonial hybridity, is very different from the term *real maravilloso* that Cuban writer, Alejo Carpentier, coined when he suggested that the "marvelous real" is just a reflection of actual American phenomena (Faris 179).

that Latin American and Latino/a writers face in reaching U.S.ian readers on their own terms.[29] This complication of genre, or genre-bending, between cultural expectations allows Díaz to create a new Latino/a space for his work that implicates unfamiliar readers seamlessly, diverting tension from his demanding text.

In spite of Yunior's skeptical narration, however, the novel still plays with the fantastic and unknowable to translate experience across cultures. Eugene L. Arva makes the link between the "truth" that Magical Realism can express about traumatized experience to argue that the fantastic bridges conceptual gaps in storytelling.[30] He argues for addressing the silences, just like those Yunior negotiates, writing:

> I believe that the link between trauma and the writing that recovers it is established through the traumatic imagination, a compulsive call for storytelling, an inner urge of the authors' psyche to restore, through their narrators and characters, voices that histories of horror and eventual post-traumatic cultures have reduced to silence. The fantastic, as an essential component of magical realism, comes to bridge the caesura in the transmission of violent realities. Magical realism writes the silence that trauma keeps reverting to, and converts it into history. (Arva 23)

By attempting to grasp the many silences, the páginas en blanco that have yet to make sense in his consciousness, Yunior articulates his fissured experience as testimony. His endeavor

[29] "McOndo" appeared as the perversion of Gabriel García Marquez's Macondo, which writer Alberto Fuguet rejected with Magic Realism in his famous 1996 anthology introduction essay.

[30] "Whether the author is a primary witness of the extreme event or not, chances are that readers become secondary or tertiary witnesses of sorts, and possibly vicariously traumatized by the narrated events. However, being traumatized by proxy is not the same as being a victim: by transgressing the boundaries of verisimilitude, the magical realist text may both *convey* the author's empathy (through their narrators and/or characters) and at the same time *induce* empathy on the part of the readers—not by appropriating the victim's voices but, rather, by making them heard for the first time. And even if the extreme events which the text re-creates can be neither understood nor represented (in the traditional, mimetic sense) as a coherent history, magical realist writing takes on the daunting task of reconstructing history in order to bring it closer to the readers' conceptual system and their affective world" (Arva 7).

to testify to his traumatic origins has many implications for the novel's reception. First, in testifying, Yunior may be seen to reclaim a subjective voice for his *othered* experience, as Kelly Oliver suggests.[31] Yunior engages an expected reader by hailing an audience to bear witness to his narrative through direct conversation and interpolation through the footnotes. The reader must then navigate between the expanded allusions to intercultural fantasy that Díaz uses to facilitate a new common ground.

Pushing this discussion of Yunior's traumatic testimony further, I contend that Yunior's conversational style of narration and the evocation of aural perception in the rhythmic turns of Diaz's prose seem to hail an active listener, or witness, to the tale that Yunior imparts. Treading through the heard dialects of the Dominican Republic and the urban, northeastern United States, Diaz presents Yunior as a talker, a colloquial observer who intersperses English, Spanish, Elvish and slang in his seemingly inaccessible text.

Díaz's manipulation of language has inspired communities of readers to converse online, and clarify terms for each other. Active blogs and even an independently created site of *Oscar Wao* annotations suggests that Yunior's narrative engages reader interaction in real time. Significantly these readers are also unknown to each other, but relate through the shared novel's community.[32] Readers struggle to make sense of the unfamiliar terms in various languages, adding another phonic element to the prose that offers words without meaning and unsettles the reader's grasp of language, mimicking Yunior's own multi-lingual immigrant experience. This unusual interaction between the narrator and the reader depends

[31] In *Witnessing*, Kelly Oliver writes: ""Through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects. What we learn from beginning with the subject position of those othered is that the speaking subject is a subject by virtue of address-ability and response-ability" (7).

[32] See Judge and *The Annotated Oscar Wao*

upon the neutral space that Díaz makes possible for discussing difficult truths by manipulating the novel's genre.

Yunior's multifaceted narrative could be seen as the counter-spell to the curse of the historical mono-narrative that ignores his personal experience. His obsessive consideration of plural voices and perspectives, with diverse narrative techniques like the footnotes and aural considerations, parallel a ritualistic storytelling to oppose the fukú of historical disempowerment. Just as Joan Dyan explores the "historical functions of Vodou" with its "concreteness, its obsession with details and fragments" to discuss how the people have used it as a mechanism,[33] a system of beliefs to turn their lives around, Yunior's meticulous multiple narrative could be seen as an attempt to seize the curse of his origins as they are known in the mono-narrative. He depends upon these fragments of his confronted experience to present a testimony for the readers who live within the logic of the mono-narrative as well.

The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao complicates reader expectations of fiction with productive results for encountering unfamiliar experiences in literature in the United States. While Oscar garners immediate attention as the title character, we see over the course of the novel that Yunior's speculative reconstruction of the de León family curse serves more to help him make sense of his own personal history than to raise Oscar as an epic hero. In telling Oscar's story about the fukú inherited from conquest, slavery, dictatorship, and diaspora, and particularly by employing footnotes as gossip—a safe framework for intimate secrets and an unstable authority in a work of fiction, Yunior is actually bringing his own history of personal and cultural trauma to language, testifying to his incomprehensible past, and begging witness of his contemporary audience in the United States. Yunior's testimony

[33] Dyan, xvii.

in the novel gestures toward renewed intercultural communication that bypasses divisive tensions between hypothetical perpetrators and victims, which defamiliarizing literary genres make possible.

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